

The Art of Being Lost

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'SL', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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Abstract

Flash fiction is style of fiction writing characterized by its brevity. There are no set guidelines for the number of words, but the common practice is around 750 words or less. Flash fiction writing employs the same elements as other writing styles, such as conflict and protagonists, but it must be done in a limited amount of space. Because of its concision, flash fiction emphasizes the need for strong, precise language, often of a lyrical quality, much like poetry. Collections of flash fiction may even be bound together by an overarching theme to express the various viewpoints on a certain subject. Here I demonstrate the writing style known as flash fiction, collecting this series together in an attempt to explore my own theme: loss.

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I would also like to thank Dr. Anthony Edmonds for proving to me that I can write about myself and people will actually still want to read it.

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Author's Statement

Words are an important aspect of the English major. We study words, determining the denotations as well as the connotations each word can hold. For my thesis project, I wanted to examine a particular word in this manner, considering the various meanings of a single word and the different ways it can be used. The word I chose was loss.

In our culture today, most people seem to associate the word loss with death. It is even etiquette to say "I'm sorry for your loss" at funerals and wakes. This was certainly the first thing that I imagined when I began my project. I took the idea of losing a life into account in a few of my pieces, such as "The Wild Things" and "Alone." In pieces such as these, I explored the feelings associated with the death of a loved one to reflect the meaning behind this connotation of loss. "Alone" assesses the immediate feelings connected with loss, while "The Wild Things" considers the emotions involved with death after a longer period of time.

Although death may be the most common connotation of the 'loss of a person,' it is not the only meaning behind this phrase. A person can physically disappear and leave their loved ones with a sense of loss. I explore this side of loss in the piece "Into the Wilderness We Fall." The piece follows a family through a period of several months after the mother has abandoned them; each member of the remaining family experiences the loss in a different way, demonstrating how these feelings can be different yet similar to those associated with death.

In other pieces, the loss that I write about is not the physical absence of a person. For example, in "Two Rivers" and "R.I.P.P." I describe two different people who have lost something important to them. In these pieces, I show that whether an object is real or imagined, the sense of loss can be similar. However, the feelings aren't necessarily the same as with the passing or desertion of a person.

Yet in the “Go” trilogy, I examine a different connotation of loss altogether: damage and destruction. The trilogy demonstrates the slow demise of humanity and the impact that this has on the remaining society. These pieces also take into account other aspects of loss, pulling from the idea of the loss of a loved one, as in “Go,” as well as the squandering of hope in “Went.”

Loss does not always have to involve the physical misplacement or death of something, such as with “R.I.P.P.” or “Go”. At times, a person can be at a loss, which means that she is in a state of bewilderment. In “Gone,” the last section of the “Go” trilogy, my goal was to invoke the feeling of loss and hopelessness in the readers as they read about the aftermath of an apocalyptic situation, rather than showing similar emotions in a character. This connotation is also explored in the final piece, “Hitcher.” The narrator is at a loss in her life—confused about where to go next, until she picks up a hitchhiker. The ending of the piece also offers another way of examining loss—through its antonym. By the end of the piece, the narrator has essentially found a path for herself and discovered a way out of her emotional dilemma, finding an opposite to her ‘loss.’

There are many other connotations for loss, and I could write hundreds of other pieces to illustrate the different meanings. However, I think that the pieces I have written successfully demonstrate the ideas behind loss, and how the different meanings can impact a person’s emotions, whether it is because of the loss of a loved one in death or simply being perplexed and at a loss.

Go

Jerry's got a hold on my arm, wrenching me down the hallway of my Pennsylvania home. My pulse pounds in my ears, and I'm surprised that my heart can still beat. Jerry's shotgun blasts a few inches away from my head. My mind swims. My left ear rings at an excruciating pitch. Jerry yells something but I can't make out any of the words. I tug forward but his grip on my arm is iron.

Time has slowed to a crawl. Every detail penetrates my senses but I've lost all understanding. I stare straight ahead.

Alex's face is contorted in agony and fear. Blood rains down from her chin, splattering her soft yellow sweater. A grey, blood-caked hand creeps around Alex's head, fumbling to grasp her skin, while another clasps tightly to her left wrist. Celia finally latches onto Alex's pretty brown hair, yanking her head backwards. Celia unleashes a guttural shriek before taking a chunk out of Alex's forearm.

My mind struggles to comprehend the situation. A mix of strange thoughts and useless memories trickle into my head. Celia, our elderly neighbor, was always pinching Alex's round cheeks, saying how she could just eat her up. In the midst of all the jumble, a hollow laugh escapes my cracked lips.

Alex doesn't scream this time. Instead, her eyes lock onto mine. The maniacal laugh catches in my throat. Another pull on my arm, but my feet are bolted to the floor. More unintelligible shouts. Alex's stare doesn't break even when Celia begins gnawing further up her arm. She opens her mouth, but all I hear is whimpering. *I am whimpering.* I look back at Jerry, who has stopped struggling with me and is gaping at Alex. I look back at her, too. She is still speaking. No. Shouting. No. At me. No.

No. I echo her word. Alex lifts her hand. Something glitters. She reaches out for me.

No. Something small strikes my chest. I look down. Alex's wedding ring twinkles at my feet. I lean down and scoop it into my hand.

When Jerry drags me backwards, I do not fight. I close my fingers over the ring and look back up at Alex. Her legs give out from the blood loss, falling to her knees. Celia moves to her neck. As Jerry pulls me outside, Alex's words finally become clear. Go.

R. I. P. P.

Tommy cried when he lost you. I've never seen anyone so heartbroken as the day I told him that you were gone. It's really hard for him to accept. He's doing his best, but you know how it is. Well, I guess you don't, do you? You never had to go through this.

It's almost worse for me, watching Tommy suffer so much. A mother never wants to see her child feel so sad. It just breaks my heart. I wish I could give you back to him. But I can't. Because you're gone, lying in a cold, lonely box, buried deep under a pile of clothes in the back of my closet. It was time to take you away, trust me. R.I.P.P. Rest in peace, pacifier.

The Wild Things

Elena stamped through the door, dripping snow from her boots and the tip of her nose, shedding layers of clothing as a snake sheds skin. Quiet. As she passed through the foyer and into the living room, her fingers flittered to the top of the television stand, caressing the cool, slick surface of the petite urn. It sighed at her touch, relieved she was home from work. She shuffled forward, skirted around the couch, and slipped into the cluttered blue bedroom just beyond the living room. *I'm home!* Atop the faded grey rocking chair in the corner sat an extra-small, Dartmouth-green sweater with a pair of blue jeans. Upon her entrance, the outfit jumped out of its chair and rushed at her, throwing its sleeves around her thigh. *I missed you too, sweetie-pie.* The sleeves released her leg and tugged at her hand, pointing back to the rocking chair with its other sleeve. *Yes, we'll read again.* Elena lowered herself into the rocking chair. The outfit hoisted itself onto her knees and curled on her lap, shoulder snuggled under her breast, pants legs bent and propped against her stomach. Elena took the book in her hands and held it before her. *Where the Wild Things Are.* The sleeves clapped together noiselessly. A grin crawled across her face and she began.

Went

The world went to shit five years ago. The geeks said it's a disease, some mutated bacteria turned disastrous. The conspiracy nuts said it's a medical experiment that got out of the government's hands. The religious freaks said we're being punished by God. I imagine it started like this. Some unlucky soul was sitting on the couch when he got this tickle in his brain. The more he tried to scratch it, the crazier he went, 'til finally he itched away everything but those two most primal urges. Aggression and hunger. So when that's all that was left, he attacked and ate those that made him angry: the rest of us. And once he sank his teeth into you, you were done. The geeks say whatever bacteria is in their saliva mixes into your blood and you have a few hours before you turn into a brainless cannibal, too.

A rustle behind me roused my attention and Chase burst into my thoughts, breathing heavily. "I found a place."

The school was pristine. It must have closed down when the outbreak first started, before panic really seized people. While Marty and Carolina gathered the rest of the group, Chase and I picked our way through the locks on the back door. The classrooms were still in neat order, save for the papers that had drifted to the floor when the years had taken their toll on the adhesive. A layer of undisturbed dust covered everything. A faint smell of rotted food still lingered in the stale air. A small greenhouse stood in the back yard, its current contents dead and decaying, but we'd soon liven it up with our own sparse collection of crops.

I sent Danny and Sam to clean the putrid food out of the cafeteria. Marty and Carolina helped Chase look through the lockers. Josh found the nurse's office and sorted through the

supplies. Others cleared out some inner classrooms. Wandering into one classroom, I paused to look at the decorated walls, where maps of different countries were tacked. While studying Guatemala, movement outside caught my eye. A blond man stumbled through the grass, slowly, staring at the school. He wore a red t-shirt and khaki shorts. Too cold for that.

I yelled for Chase. He found my classroom and I pointed to the man. “Should we let him in?”

“Look at the way he’s walking, Chase. He’s an infected.”

Chase studied him. “He looks normal.”

It wasn’t a lie. Unlike the others, this man still looked like us. His skin was pink and fleshy rather than grey and rotted, he was clean as opposed to covered in death and dirt, and he didn’t appear to have any wounds. “Where was he bitten?”

“Maybe it’s somewhere we can’t see. On his back or...” He shrugged.

“Is everyone inside?”

“Yeah. Danny and Sam just finished outside. We’re safe.”

“Are we?”

The man was a few feet from the building now. He looked at us. I barely breathed. But Chase turned to me, ignoring him. “We’re safe here, Sophie. For once, we’re safe. This freak’ll get hungry, move on, and we won’t have to worry.”

Several days passed uneventfully. One morning I was sitting at the window of my Social Studies room when Chase walked in. “What are you doing?”

“That blond guy from the other day is still here. Why do you think he hasn’t left? He’s gotta be hungry.”

“What?” Chase moved behind me and looked outside. The infected man was standing several yards from the school, staring as if confused. I glanced at Chase. His eyes were wide, and his mouth hung open.

“Chase?”

“I-I killed him yesterday. When I went out with Miller to clear out the greenhouse? He came after me so I snapped his neck.”

“Did you... do it right?”

“Five years of doing this, Soph, I think I know how to kill these things.”

“Why didn’t you burn him?”

“No time. I saw a couple infecteds in the street, so we had to run back inside.”

“And you’re sure-”

“Soph, his damn head was backwards.”

“So then... they can’t be killed anymore?”

“We don’t know that they’re invulnerable,” I shouted over the panicked voices of our ragtag group. We sat inside a former math room, most at the desks, looking to Chase and me like we were the teachers who once educated these walls. I sighed and leaned forward, my palms flat on the desk in front of me. “We don’t know that. All we know is that, yes, this one didn’t die. But Chase and I are going to go out and try again. Damage the brain.”

“But the blood,” Carolina interrupted. “It’ll draw any infected around right to us.”

“We’ve got a plan.”

We were halfway between the school and the field, luring the blond infected away from our new home, when I heard Chase curse. My blood froze. I looked away from the infected and noticed that he, Chase, and I were no longer alone. Several more infecteds—nine by my count—were slowly approaching from all directions. They weren’t close yet, but that didn’t matter. They’d already smelled us.

I turned back to see the blond infected only inches from me. I stumbled away but he grabbed my arm and lurched for my face. I thrust my hand up, shoving the thin blade of the cafeteria cutting knife into his eye. He released me, staggering backwards, shrieking with rage and pain. But he didn’t fall.

Chase flew to my side, taking my hand and dragging me back toward the school. I screamed. “Chase. Chase! He didn’t die!”

“I know.”

“He didn’t die!”

“I know!”

We reached the school quickly, slamming inside. People shouted around us. Chase yelled back, “Get any weapon you can!” Some ran, following his orders; a few remained, still streaming panicked thoughts. “There are so many!” “Where did they come from?” “You stabbed him—why didn’t he die?” “What’s going to happen?” “Are we safe here?”

Marty interrupted the noise, bursting into the crowd, panting, eyes wild. “Soph, Chase. *Jesus*. You have to see this.”

There were now twenty or more infecteds outside, approaching the school. Through the walls, we heard them shrieking and howling, drawing more of their kind to us. But that wasn't the worst; they were armed. A young teenager, whose left leg was so badly shredded that the bone peeked through the grey flesh, dragged a weathered two-by-four behind him. An older man wearing coveralls, his right arm missing from the elbow down, carried a grey-white bone in his left hand. I could only assume it was his own bone, no doubt stripped of its flesh by his own consumption. A young woman, brown hair hanging in patches over her half-eaten face and whose yellow sweater was stained with old blood, rot, and filth, carried a slender piece of sharp metal in each hand.

“What the fuck are we gonna do? Chase?! They have weapons, and nothing we do seems to kill them!” Marty was screaming.

“They'll get in here eventually,” Carolina whispered. I looked at her. I hadn't even noticed she was standing beside me. “This is it, isn't it? We're going to die?”

I looked back outside without a reply. Chase and Marty ran out of the room, shouting more orders. But a man outside had my attention. His one eye had found me. And as I watched, he reached up and slid the knife out of his face, gripping it tightly.

Two Rivers

Yesterday I could fly. It's really frustrating. All of a sudden, I was knocked down, grounded, clipped of my wings, an all around flightless bird.

Oh, I don't mean for this to sound metaphorical. I could actually fly. And today I tried to take off and I just couldn't! I sort of freaked out when I discovered I'd lost my flight. It must have scared my neighbors 'cause security showed up. So I guess I resolved to take a nap and clear my head.

Maybe this was just a bad dream anyway.

But when I woke up, my flight was still gone. This time, though, I stayed calm and tried to think logically about what could be happening.

So I started with my environment. I live in this little studio apartment, about the size of my finger (utilities all inclusive, which makes up for the size), in a complex called Two Rivers. I guess it's more like a dorm than an apartment, though. There are common areas and a cafeteria. It's all I can afford, I guess. It's nice though. Walls are a little thin; I can hear my neighbor crying just about every night, poor thing. Oh, and we also have our own private security that checks on each and every one of us every day, which is really thoughtful. But I've lived here for four years and nothing's changed recently so I don't think that it would have anything to do with my flight.

I thought about my health. Connie's crying keeps me up some nights, and the cafeteria food can be pretty nasty sometimes, but overall I'm in good health. Oh. I started taking new vitamins a couple weeks ago. But I think that probably would have had an impact earlier.

I couldn't come up with anything. I decided I should ask my boyfriend, Samuel Michael; maybe he'd have some ideas. Oh, I have the shiest boyfriend. We've been dating a few

months—he moved in to the apartment complex six months ago and we still haven’t kissed yet! He says he’s not ready, and I think that’s okay ‘cause I like to take things slow, too. But he’s really smart. He always knows what to do when I have a problem. He works an awful lot, though, so I don’t get to see him as much as I’d like. But I remembered I was meeting him tomorrow morning so I decided I’d try to stay cool until I could talk with him.

“I heard you had a problem yesterday,” Samuel said. We were sitting in one of the common rooms. He sat in a chair across from me, a tiny coffee table between us. He looked very nice; he must have come straight from work. He had a cup of coffee sitting in front of him. I didn’t. Coffee makes me too excitable. His notepad sat open on his knee. He says he likes to write down what we talk about so he can remember it. Isn’t that sweet?

“Yes, I really need to talk to you about that. I lost my flight,” I confessed. Samuel raised his eyebrows as he looked at me. His fingers wrote without his eyes even looking at the paper. I sighed. “What am I going to do? How could this happen?”

“You’re saying you can’t fly anymore?”

I shook my head. “No. I noticed yesterday afternoon. I’ve been able to fly since I was, what, sixteen? It’s a part of me. And now it’s gone. What if it doesn’t come back?”

“Don’t worry,” Samuel said. “You remember what we’ve talked about?”

“Yeah, you said things would change with you, that things would get better.” Samuel nodded. I groaned. “But it’s my flight. I need it.”

“Do you?”

I thought about it. I guess I didn’t really need it. Other people can clearly survive and thrive without it. “I’m going to miss it.”

“I know. But we’re all about moving forward here, aren’t we?” Samuel sipped his coffee as he looked at me, waiting for an answer.

Alone

In my dream, I hear someone calling my name. No one else notices. I turn in search of the source, only to find I've buried my face into a pillow. I lie still, eyes now open, trying to figure out if the voice had been real. My thoughts are answered by banging on my window and a woman's voice shouting my name.

I shoot out of bed, knocking my glasses to the floor, yelling for my mom. My phone rings, Grandma. I answer but hear nothing. I race through the house and into my mom's bedroom. Empty. I squint at the clock, 6 am, too early for her to be gone. There is a knock on the door. My phone rings again. Now there is banging on the back door.

Am I still dreaming?

My heart pounds and I lose my breath. Terrified tears threaten to drown my cheeks. I clutch my phone to my chest and tip-toe into the kitchen.

Pressing my nose to the window and squinting into darkness, I nearly scream when a face appears on the other side of the glass. My phone is still ringing, so I finally answer it.

"Hello?"

"Are you awake?"

"I don't know."

Grandma informs me that my aunt and uncle are on their way to the house. I inform her that they've already arrived. I open the front door and let my uncle inside. It's freezing. I still have to squint without my glasses.

"What's going on?"

"Your dad's not doing so good."

In the hospital room, I look at him. His skin is an awful color, yellow and pale all at once. His tongue is swollen and I can't figure out why. It doesn't seem appropriate to ask. He's having trouble breathing, and makes a noise similar to snoring with each breath. It's such a wretched sound. I watch him struggle to breathe, wondering if it's because of his tongue or an effect of the stroke. I want to leave the room. Or possibly puke.

He has passed away and I sneak out of the room. I stand alone, but I'm not attempting to hide. I'm trying to catch my breath. Family members walk by me without seeing me. Some time goes by before one notices me and takes me into the waiting room with the others. I'd rather be alone.

The viewing lasts for years. I know few people, and they don't know me either. So I wander the parlor instead of standing in the receiving line.

The whole building is unbearably hot, but it's too cold to step outside. I mash a tissue in my palm. It's become dangerously soft and twisted from an hour of sweat, tears, and being worked by my fingers. I want to get rid of it but can't find a trashcan. My black pantsuit has no pockets.

A childhood friend is here. I am chatting with my aunt when I notice him rushing away from the coffin. Without giving her a warning, I leave my aunt and intercept my friend, hugging him as he cries into my shoulder. I wonder at the fact that I'm comforting him at *my* father's wake.

He mutters something into my hair so I look at him. His face is red and wet. I smile and hand him my tissue.

I can't remember how I got to the cemetery. The pastor's words make me angry because she talks about me and my sister too much. It's raining and cold. The texture of the metal casket looks like a golf ball. The flowers atop it are ridiculous.

The casket has been lowered and everyone is leaving the cemetery. Someone holds an umbrella over my sister and me as we walk back to the car. I take a last look behind me. One man is still beside the grave, looking sadly into the hole where his friend will rest forever. He holds no umbrella and the rain assaults him. I stop to watch him. The rain showers me now, too.

I can hardly breathe. My heart pounds. My chest is heavy. My knees quiver. This is the most heartbreaking thing I will ever see. But I can't even cry.

"Alisha."

I turn away, answering the voice that called to me. My sister beckons me to the car. This time, I don't look back.

Into the Wilderness We Fall

About a month after Mom left, Tyler noticed that the house was getting messy. Dad's socks were strewn about the house in various locations: his bedroom, the living room, the hallway, even the kitchen. There was a small pile of candy and Slim Jim wrappers growing beside the couch. Georgey and Tyler's bedroom was a maze of books, dirty clothes, and DVDs.

Tyler stood inside the doorway to the living room. Georgey was suctioned to the couch, either oblivious to or purposefully ignoring his older brother.

"Does the house look dirty to you?" Tyler asked.

"Hmm?" Georgey turned to Tyler in slow motion. He blinked. "No. It looks fine to me."

As the days faded into one another, the clutter verged on disaster. The wrapper pile had become a trashy tower, wobbling as high as Georgey's round nose. A trail of socks now wound its way into each room of the house. A pyramid of empty pop cans challenged the height of the computer desk in the office, and a thin film of dust coated any flat surface.

Tyler entered the house, following the socks into the living room. He stopped at the trail's end and listened. Fingers stabbed away at a touch-screen, but no little brother to accompany the sound.

"Georgey?"

The trashy tower shivered and Georgey's head poked around its side. "Yeah?"

"Oh, there you are." Georgey stared at Tyler. "Never mind." Georgey disappeared once more behind his garbage.

Tyler kicked a crumpled sweatshirt away from his left foot. Then bending down, he examined the floor now void of any debris. A small tuft of green grass poked through the carpet like weeds through sand. Tyler ran his fingers over the blades. "Hmm."

Soon, Tyler left for college. He returned home one weekend, a few weeks into the semester. Dad greeted him on the porch. "Tyler! Guess what." Tyler didn't know. Dad grinned, leaning in, and whispered, "There's a tree growing in my bedroom!"

"Oh?" Tyler followed Dad into the house. They shuffled through the knee-high grass, the sock trail barely visible through the green. Tyler stumbled over what he assumed to be a pair of jeans. Making their way through the living room, Tyler looked toward the couch. From a mound of wrappers and morning glory growing atop the couch, a hand emerged, waving at Tyler.

Dad parted the curtain of Dutchman's pipe and he and Tyler entered his room. The feather grass in Dad's room reached Tyler's bellybutton. A mountain of clothes covered the entirety of the nightstand. Several ferns sprouted from the furniture: the top of the television, the dresser, the chair in the corner. A maturing Willow stood at the end of the bed. Socks dangled from some of the limbs, adding a trace of white to the overwhelming amount of green.

Tyler studied the tree. "Is this... okay?"

"Okay?" Dad scowled. He sat on the edge of the bed and touched one of the drooping limbs. He didn't speak; instead he just stared at the Willow.

Gone

They once said New Zealand was safe. It was now swarming with them. One person inflicted with the disease had snuck onto a boat and spread the hell to everyone on the islands.

China had been one of the first to lose all life, the United States one of the last.

There had been safe areas. For awhile at least. A huge church in Texas. A factory in Arkansas. A hospital in Oregon. A school in Pennsylvania.

But they were gone now. Everyone was gone.

Except them. The people that had become the disease.

The infected.

Hitcher

Kate drove along a cold country road, singing loudly to the radio. Well into the second verse, Kate noticed a figure in the road ahead. She slowed as she approached and noticed that the figure was a young woman. Approximately twenty years old and just over five feet, her body still looked extremely thin despite her thick down jacket. A stuffed duffle bag weighed down her left side, and her right hand jutted out from her side, thumb in the air. Her short red hair blew into her eyes as she watched Kate's car roll to a stop in front of her.

Kate rolled down the passenger side window and invited the girl into the car. The girl flung her duffle in the back on top of Kate's and piled into the passenger seat. "Thank you. It's so cold out there."

Kate began driving again. The girl buckled her seat belt and looked at Kate. "You know, hitch-hiking is illegal. Not to mention dangerous." Kate smiled despite her warning.

"What are you, a cop?"

"In-training," Kate answered. "I was about six weeks into the thirteen week training academy."

The young woman nodded. "Wow. I've got some good luck I guess." Kate looked at her, eyebrow raised. "Well you're a 'cop in-training'. Someone worse could have picked me up."

Kate nodded. "Yeah you're probably right. So what's your name?"

"Oh, uh, my name's Summer."

Kate smiled at the road. "So what's your real name?" The girl looked at Kate, her eyes searching her face. A whisper of a smile played across her face but she didn't say anything. Kate glanced at her. "My name is Kate."

“So what are you doing now, Kate?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Well you said you *were* six weeks into training. What are you doing now then?”

“Now?” Kate considered the question. She looked out of the window, at the grey, lifeless trees and the winter-parched fields. A brown rabbit stuck its nose out from a tuft of dead grass as the car hummed past. “I’m debating whether or not to go back.”

Summer hooked her thumb over her shoulder, “From the looks of your backseat, I’d say you’ve already decided.”

Kate looked at her backseat in the rearview mirror. Summer’s blue duffel blended perfectly with the assorted duffels and suitcases strewn across the floorboard and the seats. She glanced away, staring instead at the road ahead. She didn’t say anything.

“Well, I’m going to the West Coast,” Summer mused, smiling.

“Oh yeah? What’s out there? Hollywood?”

Summer shook her head. “No. A fresh start.”

Kate glanced at her. The girl was gazing out the passenger window at the silent fields. A light snow was beginning to swirl around the car. “That sounds nice.”

“So how far are you taking me?”

“Sorry?”

“How far are you taking me? Where are you going?”

Kate’s brow furrowed. “Oh. I, uh... well, I’m not really....”

Summer turned to Kate and grinned. “You’ll have to decide sooner or later.” She watched Kate for a moment, studying her profile. Then she added, “You could come with me.”

Kate laughed. “What?”

“Yeah. Come with me out West. Drop out of cop school and try something new.”

Kate looked at Summer, mouth slightly open. She was no longer laughing. “You’re serious?”

Summer nodded. “Why not?”

“Well first of all, I know nothing about you! I don’t even know your last name—I don’t even know your *real* name. Not to mention, I live here. I can’t just pick up and—and leave!”

“Then why is your backseat full of packed bags?”

“I... I...” Kate once again glanced into her backseat. An exasperated huff escaped her lips and she stared at the road.

“I know it seems, well, absolutely insane, and trust me, I’m terrified about what’ll happen when I get there, but I need this. I need to escape from this place, leave behind all the bad, find some peace in life.” Summer was watching Kate again. Kate’s mouth formed voiceless words, and she shook her head gently. She looked at her backseat in the rearview mirror.

The car slipped into the shadows cast by the trees looming on either side of the road. A fawn trembled into the road, and Kate slowed to a stop several feet away. It sniffed at the car, ears twitching. Kate stared at it.

Summer said softly, “You seem like you could use a fresh start, too.”

The young deer turned from the car and dashed into the woods. Kate looked after it for a moment, then turned to Summer. “Okay.”